

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." ³⁰ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Introduction

Table fellowship itself involves *actually* remembering the Lord Jesus. The point is not to talk about remembering or about the various interpretations regarding communion. During a communion service, the point is to remember the Lord Jesus in a special way. In communion, we do not come to talk *about* eating the food on the table; instead, we come to eat the food on the table. We do not come to discuss what remembering might involve; we come *to engage our minds with special focus on Christ*.

Nevertheless, there are times of preaching when we ought to talk about communion, about what it means to remember, and about various interpretations of its true nature. We can therefore distinguish between preaching communion remembrances and preaching regular sermons. For example, consider how inappropriate it would be to spend our reflections at the Lord's Table debating, even simply pondering, the question of the use of wine (i.e. what are the arguments? Is it okay to use grape juice?).

Today's message on Matthew 26.26-30 is a regular sermon, a regular exposition of the text of the Gospel of Matthew. This is therefore a message about communion; it is not a communion message. This is a message about how we should understand the nature of communion based on the two words, "This is" in relation to the body and blood of Christ. My title is therefore, "A Meal not a Sacrifice."

The simple words (this is my body; this is my blood) give us the core of one of the most important practices in the Christian church. Sadly, realistically, the only thing that exceeds the importance of these simple words is the not so simple controversy that surrounds them. Therefore, we need to spend some time orienting ourselves to the confessional conflict that exists regarding the words "this" and "is" in relation to the body and blood of Christ (26.26-27, **Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."** ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood). The outline today covers two things that indicate a meal and not a sacrifice: reference to the bread and reference to the blood.

1A. Reference to the bread indicates a meal and not a sacrifice

Some Christian thinkers (Roman Catholic and Protestant) interpret communion as a sacrifice. This view has a long history going back even before the Reformation. Therefore, it is appropriate to interact with this view, even if briefly, as we discuss our text for today. We can interact by considering the use of bread and the breaking of bread. Much help for what follows comes from Ridderbos (*Coming of the Kingdom*, 424-432).

1B. Regarding the Use of Bread

Jesus refers to His body when He distributes *the bread*. This fact should jump up and off the page at us. Notably, Jesus does not hold up the meat and say, "Because I am the true lamb, this is my body." Jesus makes *no such identification regarding the lamb* on the table. Although there is a connection between the Passover lamb and Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 5.7, **Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed**), the roasted lamb on the table does not serve our Lord's purpose on this occasion because He is instituting a new covenant Passover meal. The new wine of fulfillment

demands a new wineskin. This is a meal of transition from the Jewish Passover meal to the Christian Passover meal, the Lord's Supper.

In the OT, the lamb was both the sacrifice that protected the people from death that would otherwise come by the death angel, and it was a nourishing meal. Clearly, by connecting His body *with bread and not lamb*, Jesus *emphasizes the nourishing aspect* of the Passover meal. It puts sacrifice into a distinct perspective: they sacrificed the lamb and not the bread. The meal of course presupposes the sacrifice in both OT Passover and NT communion.

2B. Regarding the Breaking of Bread

It may be obvious to you, but just in case it is not obvious, we should stress the fact that breaking the bread does not represent breaking of the body of Christ in sacrifice. Granted, Jesus did break bread with the disciples: **Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples** (26.26). Clearly, there is a blessing, breaking, and giving of the bread, but there are good reasons to separate breaking of bread from sacrifice.

1) The OT nowhere calls for sacrifice by breaking a body apart

Breaking or tearing of the flesh of an animal is foreign to the OT sacrificial system.

2) Sacrifice was by shedding blood not by severing flesh.

We will discuss this aspect later in the second major point of the outline.

3) There was to be no breaking of the Passover lamb.

The Lord commanded the following in the original Passover: **you shall not break any of its bones** (Ex. 12.46).

4) Accordingly, it is important in John's Gospel to point out that they did not break any of the Lord's bones on the cross (Jn. 19.36).

5) 1 Corinthians 11.24 has a variant reading

It is best to recognize that though KJV has "this is my body which is *broken* for you," the word "broken" has such weak attestation that we should conclude that it is an addition to the text by scribal error (Ridderbos, *Coming*, 429).

6) Breaking bread accompanied every meal

Breaking bread is the action of the covenant father at every meal with no connection with tearing a body apart.

Where do these observations lead us? They lead us to the key to the symbolic action of Christ at His last Passover with the disciples. The key to the symbolic action (to the enacted communion parable) is not so much in the breaking of bread, but in the *distributing* of the bread. The symbolic action of importance is the giving and receiving of bread **Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."** ²⁷ **And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it** (26.26-27). That is why we should think of the distribution of food at a meal rather than the breaking or shredding of a sacrifice.

Therefore, reference to bread in relation to the body of Christ indicates a meal and not a sacrifice.

2A. Reference to the blood indicates a meal and not a sacrifice

There is another striking fact that puts the notion of sacrifice in perspective. Remarkably, when Jesus speaks about His blood (Mat. 26.28, **for this is my blood of the covenant**), He does not refer to the blood of the Passover lamb. Instead, He refers to the blood that Moses and Aaron sprinkled on the people, which is "the blood of the covenant":

³ **Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do."** ⁴ **And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel.** ⁵ **And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD.** ⁶ **And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar.** ⁷ **Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be**

obedient." ⁸ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." ⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹ And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank (Ex. 24.3-11).

Some questions will help us get our bearings on the blood of the covenant.

1) Does pouring wine represent the shedding of blood in sacrifice?

There is no linguistic connection between shedding of blood and pouring wine. If the cup represented the sacrifice of Christ, that would suggest the idea that Jesus poured out His blood for us on the cross. However, the OT never speaks of killing or sacrificing an animal as pouring out its blood (pouring went with the use of the blood after the slaughter, cf. Ex. 29.12); sacrifice involved killing (Ex. 29.11), that is, shedding of blood (Heb. 9.22). If Isaiah 53 comes to your mind in this connection, note that Isaiah tells us that Jesus poured out His *soul* in death, not His blood.

2) How can we put things in balance?

There are some traditions to overcome in this regard. Just think of how we blur the difference between roasted lambs and bread when we (in Protestant circles) sing about the power of the blood: "there is power, wonder working power in the blood of the lamb." It is not that that is radically misguided, but *with respect to the Lord's Table*, it is a significant mistake to think that Jesus has the blood of the lamb in mind when He says, "This is my blood." Granted, the blood of the covenant came from various sacrifices because Exodus tells us that young men "*offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings*," but the animals they sacrificed were "*oxen*" (Ex. 24.5). Neither context (neither Exodus 24 nor Matthew 26 where Jesus alludes to Exodus 24) connects the blood of the covenant with a slaughtered Passover lamb.

To be clear, this does not deny that the Passover lambs represented Christ and the sacrifice that He came to offer. He is the Lamb of God that John the Baptist spoke of (Jn. 1.29). As I cited earlier, Paul tells us that Christ is our sacrificed Passover lamb (1 Cor. 5.7). Therefore, the sacrifice of the Passover lamb is in view *as part of all the sacrifices* that brought forgiveness of sins to the people of God.

Moreover, the disconnection between the blood of the covenant and the blood of a Passover lamb does not deny the continuity of the Passover meal with the Lord's Table. It is important to recognize that the institution of communion takes place within the Passover meal and this fact supports the conclusion that communion is the Christian Passover.

Nevertheless, we must strongly affirm that within the context of the Passover, of the Jewish Passover becoming the Christian Passover, Jesus does not speak of the eating of roasted lamb, nor does He speak of the blood of the sacrificed lamb. To repeat, when He says, "This is my body and blood," He is referring to bread and the blood of the covenant, not to lamb or the blood of the Passover lamb. Thus, we must conclude that in form and ritual, Christian Passover is more Christian than it is Passover.

3) How can we characterize the blood of the covenant?

The Exodus text informs us of two uses of the blood. After collecting it into two basins (24.6), Moses sprinkled half of the blood on the altar. Then, he read the Book of the Covenant. When the people professed obedience to the covenant, he sprinkled the other half of the blood on them saying, **Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words** (24.8). At that point in the narrative, Moses and some leaders went up to the mountain where **they beheld God, and ate and drank** (24.11). Moses (and the leaders) ate and drank in the presence of God on the mountain. In a word, is not the presenting of the sacrificial blood to God on the altar, but it is the application of the blood to the people that establishes covenant fellowship with God. Partaking of a meal on the mountain by the leaders represented the covenant fellowship in which human beings see the glory of God and do not die (24.11). Instead of dying, they live, sustained

by food and drink in the presence of God. The blood of the covenant *indirectly* presupposes various sacrifices (with Passover sacrifice as primary among them, perhaps equal with sacrifice on the Day of Atonement), but it *directly* refers to the benefit of those sacrifices, which is covenant fellowship with God at a meal.

Implications and applications

1) Diverting the stream at its source

Ridderbos puts it well when he says that the idea of “communion as sacrifice” “diverts the river-bed [of sacramental theology and of biblical teaching] in a clear and remarkable way at the source of the stream” (Ridderbos, *Coming*, 428).

Catholic theology speaks of the Eucharist, a term for communion that means thanksgiving, as a sacrifice and thus as dramatic actualization or re-actualization of the cross (Hahn, *Making Sense out of the Mass*, St. Joseph’s Communications, 2005). In the mass, William Casey says, “we all to come to be present at the last supper; to stand at the foot of the cross; transcend time and to relive the passion and keep it in front of our eyes” and the power of the mass is that it makes “Calvary present again” (*The Holy Eucharist*, St. Joseph’s Communications, 2005).

Protestant commentators slip on this point as well. For example, Wilkins (The NIV Application Commentary, *Matthew*) says that by blessing the bread, Jesus “identifies himself with the Passover sacrifice” (836) and regarding the wine, he says that the cup foreshadows the shedding of blood (837). Hagner (Word Biblical Commentary, *Matthew*, II) tells us that Jesus transformed the partaking of food and drink into “a symbolic portrayal of his redemptive death” (771) as a “memorializing and contemporizing of the unique sacrifice accomplished by Jesus on the cross” (772).

This kind of teaching diverts the stream of biblical teaching on communion at its source.

As noted above, the reference to bread (not lamb) and the reference to the blood of the covenant (not the blood of the lamb), indicate that communion is not dramatic re-actualization of the cross. It is clearly false and misleading to claim that communion reenacts sacrifice. It is even worse to claim that in communion sacrifice occurs as an actualization or re-actualization of the cross. Reenactment of actual sacrifice may make for interesting drama (using material things “to trigger our souls,” Hahn), but reenactment not only violates the once for all nature of the sacrifice of Christ, it also misses the real drama here, the drama of covenantal fellowship in the context of the book of the covenant. The real drama is that people come into the presence of God and live, not only do they live, but also they eat and drink in fellowship with the God of all glory.

2) A very new wineskin

Furthermore, when Jesus speaks of His body and blood in relation to bread and wine, He is transforming Passover (He is with His disciples celebrating the divinely commanded Passover meal) into the covenantal meal of Exodus 24. He is drawing from the covenantal meal of the old covenant (Ex. 24) to transform the Passover meal into the new covenant meal of communion. He is not perpetuating the Mosaic meal on the mountain. Rather, He is perpetuating key elements of that meal in His transformation of Jewish Passover into Christian Passover. Perhaps in most respects, little remains of the Passover in Christian worship. The OT shadows truly pass away in NT fulfillment. The new wine of fulfillment demands a very new wineskin.

3) Fellowship

Note that “communion” (co-union) means fellowship! He welcomes us in the presence of God at a meal. We have access. His body and His blood secured this meal of fellowship for us. He endured an inconceivable loss of fellowship with the Father on the cross, in order to give us the fruit of His sacrifice, to give us fellowship with the triune God.

4) Celebration

All the meals of Jesus sitting with sinners and sharing the good news become this single meal of joy and rejoicing in the acceptance of sinners.

5) Nourishment

The picture that comes to mind when we break the bread should not be Christ being broken on the cross. Instead, the bread and wine make up the meal and tell us of how He nourishes us. Just as food and drink nourish us daily, the work of Christ is our bread and wine that nourishes us spiritually. He is our food and drink, of course, because of the cross.

His death is our life. Just as Moses and the elders saw God and did not die; likewise, Jesus by His body and blood protects us from death and grants us life in the presence of God now and forevermore.

To put everything into perspective, consider this focus question: what is in the cup? The bread is Christ, the bread of life, but what is in the cup? Wine is in the cup. Yes, what then is in the cup? The book of the covenant is in the cup. Jesus is our nourishment (by His life, death, and resurrection) through the words of the covenant, through His covenant word.

Drink, take, and eat picture appropriation of Christ by faith guided by His word.

The enactment is that of giving and receiving life-sustaining nourishment (not sacrificing by the shedding of blood). The picture is that of finding your very life by clinging to the Lord Jesus and feasting on His holy word with holy celebration.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God in true Eucharistic thankfulness; may the Holy Spirit cause us to understand and value the fellowship, celebration, and nourishment that Jesus gives us as the fruit of His great sacrifice on the cross. To Him be all glory. Amen.